

**Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI)
for
(DOI-BLM-CA-N070-2010-0012-EA)
Nevada Cowhead Allotment
10 Year Grazing Authorization**

INTRODUCTION:

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has conducted an environmental analysis (DOI-BLM-CA-N070-2010-0012-EA) analyzing the impacts of authorizing grazing on the Nevada Cowhead Allotment (#01113) for the next ten years.

The EA analyzes (5) alternatives from which I have selected Alternative 1 (Proposed Alternative).

1. Alternative 1, the selected alternative, is described on pgs. 12-20 of the EA and consists of:

The BLM proposes to continue authorizing grazing on the Nevada Cowhead Allotment (#01113) for the next ten years.

The proposed action includes changes to current pasture management and additional Terms & Conditions that protect various resource and habitat values. It also includes the construction of 4 range improvement projects. Desired plant communities (DPCs) are defined in the Proposed Alternative for all major and some important minor ecological sites within the allotment.

The proposed action addresses the underlying need for the proposal and accomplishes the following objectives:

These objectives were developed from the Surprise Field Office Resource Management Plan (RMP) and Record of Decision, April 2008, and Standards and Guidelines (S&Gs).

Objective 1: Sustainable, ecologically sound, and economically viable livestock grazing opportunities would be provided, where suitable, in the Surprise Field Office management area.

Objective 2: Adequate forage would be produced to support sustainable levels of livestock grazing where compatible with objectives for other resources and resource users.

Objective 3: Continue to modify and adjust grazing management within individual grazing allotments to ensure that a vigorous plant community is sustained in combination with livestock grazing.

Objective 4: Ensure that the natural distribution, variety, and abundance of native plants, plant communities, and associations are restored and native plants and ecosystems remain healthy throughout their range.

Objective 5: Restore degraded landscapes, especially shrub lands dominated by exotic annual grasses, perennial grasslands choked with brush, and decadent mountain big sagebrush.

Objective 6: Ensure that vegetation provides sufficient forage, water, and cover

(thermal and escape) for wildlife.

Objective 7: Achieve healthy and productive wetland and riparian habitats through measures that will restore and protect riparian vegetation, and achieve habitat diversity and hydrologic stability.

Objective 8: Produce healthy aspen stands (upland and riparian) through measures that will promote regeneration and growth, and create size and age class diversity. Restore and maintain ecosystem integrity and productivity in natural mountain mahogany woodlands.

Objective 9: Manage critical habitats of endangered and threatened wildlife according to recovery plans or habitat management plans.

PLAN CONFORMANCE AND CONSISTENCY:

The proposed action is subject to and conforms with the “Surprise Field Office Resource Management Plan (RMP) and Record of Decision, April 2008. The RMP supports the proposed authorized use in the Nevada Cowhead Allotment as identified in Section 2.8.5 (p. 2-35)”: Which states:

“Livestock grazing would be available on 49 allotments (1,445,443 acres). The Surprise Field Office would continue to authorize approximately 92,465 AUMs of livestock use annually. Review of existing permitted use-levels (AUMs) would be conducted on individual allotments through assessment of existing activity plans (allotment management plans, livestock grazing decisions, habitat management plans, watershed management plans, biological opinions, multiple-use decisions). Decisions regarding adjustments to existing levels of use, forage allocation, allotment boundaries, and changes to management level categories would be made at the activity plan level. When additional forage becomes available on a sustained yield basis, suspended AUMs can be appointed to permittees.”

The action is also in accordance with 43 CFR 4100 and to be consistent with the provisions of the Taylor Grazing Act, Public Rangelands Improvement Act, and Federal Land Policy and Management Act.

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT DETERMINATION:

Based upon a review of the attached EA and the supporting documents, I have determined that Alternative 1, the proposed action, is not a major federal action having a significant effect on the human environment, individually or cumulatively with other actions in the general area. For this reason no environmental impact statement needs to be prepared. This finding is based on the following rationale and discussion of context and intensity of the action.

Rationale:

Following is the rationale for why the identified issues discussed in the EA will not be significantly affected or affect the action.

Cultural Resources

Cultural resources are predicted or known to occur within the allotment.

The Nevada Cowhead Allotment is located in the Northern Hays Range; an area in which cultural resource site densities are considered to be high. The Northern Hays Range Cultural Resource Management Area (CRMA) was created in 2007 as a result of the high density of cultural resource sites in the area. The CRMA is a designation that was developed by the Surprise Field Office that is intended to

provide heightened awareness of sensitive resources by increasing Law Enforcement Patrols and providing research opportunities for scientific institutions. Approximately 85% of the Nevada Cowhead Allotment is located in the North Hays Range CRMA. There have been 14 archaeological inventories conducted on the Nevada Cowhead Allotment in preparation for BLM projects. Approximately 7,835 acres of public lands, or 19% of the entire allotment, were inventoried for the projects. As a result of the inventories 169 cultural resource sites have been recorded. The majority of the sites are prehistoric and associated with hunting and gathering activities, occupation sites, lithic procurement sites, and resource processing loci. Rock art is also an important element of this prehistoric landscape. Historic sites are associated with ranching and homesteading activities.

Thirty-three of the 169 known sites have been evaluated for National Register of Historic Places eligibility. Twenty-three of the 33 sites that were evaluated were found eligible for the NRHP. However, all 33 sites are located within an area that is eligible for the NRHP as an archaeological district. The remaining 136 sites have not been evaluated for NRHP eligibility; therefore the BLM would consider these sites to be eligible until a formal determination of eligibility can be made. Within the Rock Creek Enclosure there are 20 archaeological sites that are considered NRHP eligible as part of the Rock Creek Archaeological District. Lands within the enclosure have been partially inventoried for cultural resources. The inventories have identified 20 prehistoric archaeological sites. Ten of the 20 sites were evaluated on an individual basis for NRHP eligibility. Six of the ten sites are considered eligible to the NRHP. The remaining ten sites within the enclosure have yet to be individually evaluated. However, all twenty sites are considered to be eligible as part of the Rock Creek Archaeological District.

In accordance with the 2004 State Protocol Agreement between California Bureau of Land Management and The California State Historic Preservation Officer and the 2004 Grazing Amendment, Supplemental Procedures for Livestock Grazing Permit/Lease Renewal, a Cultural Resource Assessment was conducted on the Nevada Cowhead Allotment in 2007. The assessment resulted in the identification of two archaeological sites, one previously recorded and one newly identified, that were being affected by cattle grazing. The effects to the site were trampling and soil churning during wet conditions. Both sites are located in the Rock Creek Archaeological district and are subject to heavy use in the spring as a result of the available water. An additional site located on both public and private lands near the confluence of two creeks is receiving heavy cattle use which is impacting the site. This site was determined NRHP eligible in 2005.

The short term objective of a 6" stubble height along Rock Creek and the soil moisture requirements for turn-out could reduce impacts to the two NRHP eligible cultural resource sites associated with Rock Creek that are being impacted by heavy cattle use as discussed above.

Under this alternative, impacts to the NRHP eligible sites located within the Rock Creek Archaeological District that are mentioned above, would continue to occur. The pasture rest rotation system proposed may improve ecological site function, which could lead to stabilized soils and reduced erosion problems, indirectly benefiting cultural resources.

Also under this alternative four reservoirs would be constructed. The installation of the reservoirs could disperse cattle into other areas of the allotment, which can reduce impacts that could be occurring to sites located within the vicinity of current watering areas, including Rock Creek. However, the dispersion of cattle into areas that have had little to no grazing use in the recent past could create new impacts to cultural resources that may be located in these areas. In addition, cattle trails leading to the reservoirs would be established which could affect cultural resources that may be located along the trailing paths.

Sage-grouse Habitat

The Greater sage grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*) is found within the allotment and is considered a BLM sensitive species. Greater sage grouse are found throughout the allotment and have been known to nest adjacent to the allotment. Two active sage grouse leks (strutting grounds) are known to exist within the allotment. Sage-grouse are known to use the allotment for breeding and brood rearing, with adult and young sage-grouse or their sign often seen at several locations along and between Horse Creek and Rock Creek. Sage-grouse use within the allotment is considered yearlong. The proposed action establishes Terms & Conditions for strategic livestock management, and pasture grazing rotation which would mitigate any potential impact to sage grouse populations or habitat.

Resource(s)/Concerns discussed but Eliminated as an Issue

Eleven resources and/or potential concerns were identified during internal and external scoping. These are listed and discussed in Chapter 3 of the EA, starting on pg. 31. I have reviewed the rationale provided for each resource or concern and support their elimination as an issue.

Context: The proposed action is in a project area involving a grazing allotment with six pastures totaling approximately of 39,568 acres of BLM administered public land that by itself does not have international, national, regional, or state-wide importance, but on a local level it is important to the local economy and public land health.

Intensity: The following discussion is based on the relevant factors that should be considered in evaluating intensity as described in 43 CFR 4100:

1. Impacts may be both beneficial and adverse. A significant effect may exist even if the Federal agency believes that on balance the effect will be beneficial.

I have determined that none of the direct, indirect or cumulative impacts associated with the selected alternative are significant, individually or combined.

2. The degree to which the selected alternative will affect public health or safety.

The proposed action is located within a rural setting. Grazing at similar levels as described in the selected alternative has occurred in the same location for over 20 years in combination with other human activities (OHV, hunting, hiking). Since grazing has been authorized within the affected area there have been no known instances where public health or safety has been affected or a conflict has occurred.

3. Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farm lands, wetlands, wilderness, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.

A discussion of these unique geographic areas, inventoried wilderness characteristics, and anticipated environmental issues is located in Chapter 3 of the EA, starting on pg. 31. The unique characteristics associated with the Nevada Cowhead Allotment were analyzed in the EA. Based on the EA and above rationale I have determined that the selected alternative will not have a significant impact on the unique characteristics or wilderness characteristics within the affected area.

4. The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.

Scoping for the proposed action and background information was sent to known affected and interested publics. After review of the comments and issues identified from the scoping process and those analyzed in the EA, I have determined that the effects described in the EA are not highly controversial.

5. The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.

Grazing is a widespread action authorized by the BLM, the effects from which have been thoroughly analyzed in NEPA documents, including the recent RMP, and scientific publications. The analysis provided in the attached EA does not indicate that this action would involve any unique or unknown risks.

6. The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.

The issuance of a grazing permit is not precedent setting. Grazing has been authorized on the allotment since the allotments' establishment.

7. Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts – which include connected actions regardless of land ownership.

A cumulative effects analysis was conducted as part of the EA, and it determined that there were no cumulatively significant effects associated with the selected alternative.

8. The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or other objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.

The action will not adversely affect National Register of Historic Places sites or cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historic resources. Mitigation measures for managing sites that are determined to be impacted by grazing may include: fencing, relocation of improvements, removal of natural attractants for livestock from archaeological sites, removal of the archaeological site(s) from the allotment, livestock herding away from cultural resource sites, using salt to move livestock away from cultural resource areas.

Additional management practices may be developed after consultation with the State Historic Preservation Office. Implementation of grazing under Alternative 1 will likely help stabilize existing sites through improving the vigor of perennial vegetation and by allowing litter accumulation.

9. The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) of 1973.

The action does not adversely affect any endangered or threatened species, or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the ESA.

Based on the quality of habitat, the absence of the Warner sucker within the allotment, and that proposed grazing management practices are unlikely to affect habitat and fish downstream from the allotment, BLM concludes that the proposed grazing of the Nevada Cowhead Allotment may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect the Warner sucker.

10. Whether the action threatens a violation of a federal, state, local, or tribal law, regulation or policy imposed for the protection of the environment, where nonfederal requirements are consistent with federal requirements.

The action does not violate any known federal, state, local or tribal law or requirement imposed for the protection of the environment.

Shane DeForest, Field Manager

Date